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Why Diversity Rules

“You’re wrong,” I nearly yelled,
“It’s not drugs.”

“Then what is it?” *continued* ▶

by Jerry Colonna



Patrick* sat on the other side of the room. Outside the temperature was in the 90s and the sun unrelenting. Inside, the room was filled with my partners from my private equity firm; partners, principals and associates—three of the four hierarchical investment-staff positions within the firm. There were just about a hundred of us, discussing which of the analysts would be promoted to associate, which would be left alone for another year, and which should be fired.

We were discussing Darius. Some of the principals and associates wanted to fire him. He had a drug problem they said. But I knew otherwise. I just didn't know whether I should break that confidence.

He had a **drug problem** they said.
But **I knew** otherwise.

I first noticed Darius when, in passing his cubicle one evening, I saw he'd pinned to his fuzzy wall a poem by W.H. Auden.

As modern and comfortable as the offices of my firm were, there was a disconcerting sameness to the place and, even more disconcerting, to the people. Regardless of the ethnic background, gender, or religious creed, the staff—primarily the analysts—were the same. They were all high achievers. They were all brilliant. And most had suppressed any sense of individuality.

* I've changed all the names in this piece

I couldn't blame them. Before their hiring, their skills had been assessed by people whom, themselves, had gone through a similar ritual. They'd inculcated the notion that to advance, they should be like everyone else—as much as possible.

So the guys all wore the same blue shirts and nice, slightly dressy slacks. They all wore their hair in a conservative cut. And they hardly ever let on that they had a life outside of work.

“It captures beautifully **the desolation,**
abandonment and **utter futility** of life
when faced with **a loved one's death.**”

No music. No books. No movies.

All except Darius. The Auden poem was written, he explained to me on the death of W.B. Yeats. “It's one of my favorite poems,” he explained. “It captures beautifully the desolation, abandonment and utter futility of life when faced with a loved one's death.”

Not only did he read but he didn't hold himself back. Born in India, he wore his hair long and flowing. “The girls go wild over my hair,” he told me one day. And we both laughed.

Our friendship began simply at first. We'd discuss books. One afternoon, when I was unpacking and hanging a photo of myself having dinner with Bill Clinton, he gushed that he thought Clinton was brilliant even if morally flawed. Darius, I soon realized, was able to make such distinctions quickly and easily...something most people find too difficult to bother with.

Kerri thought him crazy though. While acknowledging his brilliance, his propensity for playing with matches (and I mean that literally) made her wary. His unrelenting, unabashed flirting drove her mad.

He's a flake...but did you know he's a Rhodes Scholar?

He's a flake, I admitted to her one day, but did you know he's a Rhodes Scholar? I know he can't get out of bed on time but do you know that he has a law degree as well as a Masters?

We began working closely on deals. I knew he was drawn to me, in part, because I too was different. Having joined the firm as a partner, I didn't have the compunction to prove myself. I was allowed my eccentricities because, after all and despite the collapse of the Internet, my investments had made the firm billions.

I also listened to him. I asked questions. I told him stories of my life as I listened to stories of his.

That's how I knew he wasn't abusing drugs. After being diagnosed with depression, Darius was one of the first colleagues I confided in. And it was in that conversation that he began telling me of the struggles he felt; problems with a girlfriend—the love of his life; problems with his parents—a father who expected him to be a lawyer; and problems with his colleagues and his immediate managers who pushed him to behave himself, to speak only when spoken to, to not voice his opinion.

As the talk progressed, I asked about his sleep habits. “No,” he said. “I don't really sleep.” And then he started to cry.

His colleagues and his **immediate managers...**
pushed him...**to not voice** his opinion.

Back in the room full of colleagues I struggle with my conscience; how much should I reveal? I can't let him be fired on a suspicion of drug use but should I violate the confidence he placed in me.

I thought about my own struggles with depression and I realized that we were all too silent on the subject, especially in the workplace, especially among men.

“It's not drugs,” I repeated. “It's depression.”

The room turned to me. Some knew that I was struggling with my own issues and I realized that, because of that, I had credibility. So I went further: “I know because I told him about my depression and my need for medication. I could be wrong but I really don't think he's abusing drugs. I think he needs counseling.”

So, with the help of the human resources department, we found Darius a counselor who helped him approach his issues, calmed him, and set him on his way again.

The lesson here is more than merely standing up and speaking up. I'm convinced that people were prepared to believe the worst of Darius precisely because he was different. Moreover, in the months when he remained with the firm (he left to go back to graduate school—this time Harvard), he proved himself every bit as bright and hard-working as the next analyst. But more important, he asserted himself in his unique way and helped the firm make some interesting investments...investments it would have otherwise passed on were it not for his dogged belief.

We say we **value diversity** but
are we **really willing** to accept...
the **diversity of** personality and **style**?

Too often we create cultures that give lip-service to the notion of diversity. We say we value diversity but are we really willing to accept the hardest diversity of all—the diversity of personality and style? I'll gather that even the most enlightened firms struggle with this for it requires that we look outside ourselves as models for appropriate and correct behavior. And who among us is so enlightened as to do that as our first instinct?

Oh, and the Auden poem?

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.*

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

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A writer and consultant, Jerry Colonna is a recognized expert in organizational development and entrepreneurialism. Most recently a partner with JPMorgan Partners (JPMP), Colonna had been an investor in early-stage information technology companies for more than seven years. Previously he founded and worked at Flatiron Partners with his partner, Fred Wilson.

Jerry has been named to *Upside Magazine*'s list of the 100 Most Influential People of the New Economy, *Forbes* ASAP's list of the best VCs in the country, and *Worth*'s list of the 25 most generous young Americans. Visit Jerry's blog, "Madeleines" at <http://madeleines.typepad.com>

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
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